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SUBJECT: VATICAN STUDY SEMINAR ON GMO'S SEES MORE HOPE THAN THREAT

Refs: A) Vatican 4859, B) Vatican 4874,

C) Vatican 3917, D) Vatican 3584

¶1. Summary: The Holy See's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace's November 10-11 study seminar -- "GMO's: Threat or Hope" --found more reasons for hope than fear from its detailed examination of biotech foods. The seminar was developed by the pro-biotech President of the Council, Cardinal Martino, who sought to lay a foundation for a more forward-leaning Vatican position on GMO's. The seminar, which included both biotech advocates and opponents, considered the science, ethical and political implications of biotechnology (reftels). It generated candid exchange of views between proponents and opponents, with informative and sometimes ironic interventions. Cardinal Martino indicated to participants that the Holy See is likely to respond to the fruitful exchange of ideas generated at the seminar with a more considered position on the subject of GMOs -- which we expect will be more forward-leaning than previous, generally favorable, positions. End summary.

Day One: The Science and Economics of Biotech

¶2. The first session, GMOs and Scientific Research, included two sub-panels, "GMOs and the Contribution of the Scientific World," and "The Contribution of the Pontifical Academy for Life and of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on GMOs." Three scientists presented their views on the benefits and risks of biotechnology in the context of its historical development. Of the three, only Dr. Margaret Mellon, Food and Environment Program Director, Union of Concerned Scientists, expressed skepticism about the necessity for biotech food, stating she is not convinced that biotech is either necessary or useful. In contrast, Professor Nam-Hai Chua, a plant molecular biologist from Rockefeller University, New York, highlighted the virtues of a new transgenic rice variety. Professor Francesco Sala, University of Milan, based his presentation -- and his belief in the need for biotechnology -- on forecasted decreases in available arable land and increases in population.

¶3. During the second sub-panel, Professor Peter Raven, Director of the Missouri Botanical Garden, past President and Chairman of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and Member of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, made a strong case -- based on publications of the Pontifical Academy and the scientific community as a whole -- for using and further developing biotechnology. With regard to the use of GMOs as food, "there is no theory that contradicts the generally accepted conclusion that those currently in use are safe as food for human beings and domestic animals, and no single case of illness resulting from consuming foods produced by GMOs, even though billions of people throughout the worlds use them regularly." Rhetorically, he asked, "Why, then, do we keep saying, `Health and safety, health and safety?'" Professor Raven stated that the benefits of GM technology should be recognized, considering the widely available and accepted documentation about GM technology. For instance, the major decreases in pesticide application resulting from widespread use of GM crops are significant in the face of an estimated 500,000 cases of pesticide poisoning and 5,000 deaths that result from such applications annually.

¶4. Finally, Raven stated that the controversy over GMOs has been used to limit trade, concluding "the drive to feed hungry people and to redress the morally unacceptable imbalances around the world should take precedence over other considerations, and in this case there are no valid scientific objections to utilizing these technologies with due consideration to the implications of each new proposed transgenic crop in the environment."

¶5. The Second Session, entitled "GMOs, Food and Trade," consisted of two sub-panels, "GMOs and Food in Developed and Developing Countries" and "GMOs and Trade," and an intervention by the Italian Agriculture Minister, Gianni Alemanno. The chair of the first sub-panel, Dr. Mahmoud Sohl, Director of Plant Production and Protection Division, Agriculture Department, FAO, characterized the discussion as bearing on the "molecular divide" between developed and developing countries. One panelist focused on the widening separation between rich and poor countries and the 800

million people who are chronically undernourished. Another, Dr. Paola Testori Coggi, Director for Food Security, European Commission, focused on the need to develop a regulatory framework for GMOs, offering the EC's guidelines for labeling GM vs. non-GM food as being the "most demanding" in the world. When asked why wine and cheese are not identified as containing GMOs, Dr. Coggi offered that enzymes are considered "trace elements," and not "ingredients."

¶6. More irony ensued. At the second session Ms. Thandiwe Myeni, a small-scale farmer and Chairwoman of the Mbuso Farmers Association, South Africa, talked about her positive experience with GM (Bt) cotton, which resulted in much higher yields and significant reductions in pesticide use. Immediately following Ms. Myeni's presentation, Minister Alemanno arrived and immediately opined that, with regard to developing countries, GM technology is not available to subsistence farmers who have no use for it. He did acknowledge d that biotechnology might be beneficial, but stated that Italy follows the Precautionary Principle.

Day Two: Health, Environment and Ethics

¶7. The Third Session of the seminar on the second day covered the topic of GMOs and Environmental and Health Security. The chair for this section was Mr. Djoghlaf, Director of the Division of Global Environment Facility Coordination of the United Nations Environment Program. Professor Andrea Crisanti of the Department of Biology, Imperial College, London, presented research being done in molecular parasitology on genetically modifying the species of mosquito that spreads malaria so that it would be incapable of doing so. While this work remains very much in the lab at this time, he expressed hope, indeed expectation, that the technology can eventually lead to the eradication of malaria. Comment: It was revealing that even when presented with a potential benefit for the developing world of such unmatched proportions, the anti-GMO speakers that followed proceeded doggedly in their insistence that the risks of the technology outweighed the possible benefits. End Comment. Speakers from the Italian National Academy of Sciences and University of Tuscia spoke on the environmental benefits of the technology.

¶8. The Italian Minister of the Environment, Altiero Matteoli, delivered a strong statement in favor of GM technology, citing the environmental benefits it offers. Italy's Minister of Health, Girolamo Sirchia also delivered a positive statement, hedging somewhat towards cautiousness exemplified by labeling and precaution.

¶9. Speakers on the health implications included Dr. Harry ¶A. Kuiper of the Institute of Food Safety (RIKILT) Wageningen University and Research Center, the Netherlands. Concentrating on the risk assessment approach used by the EU, he included the notion of precaution in his statement, but stressed that GM products are the most studied and understood of any food products that have been introduced to consumers. He repeated to the audience that the risks of most conventional and traditional foods on the market are poorly studied and understood. Professor Claudia Sorlini, Director of the Department of Food Science and Microbiological Technologies, University of Milan brought out case studies highlighting uncertainty and possible human health risks based upon laboratory studies showing protein transfer through the gut. Other interlocutors pointed out that these studies are, in fact, quite old and the results have proven to be unrepeatable in real-world experiments.

¶10. The intervention by Greenpeace International Scientific Advisor for GMOs, Dr. Doreen Stabinsky, centered on well-known and increasingly worn arguments including (a) the world is more complex that scientists recognize and it is hubris to mess with it through GM technology; (b) GMOs are not the answer to feeding the world and to world development because the problems lie elsewhere -- in economic/political systems; and (c) the technology only enriches multinational companies. Comment: It was apparent, from body language if nothing else, that the anti-GMO contingent was feeling a preponderance of opinion in the room moving against them. End comment.

¶11. The final session of the meeting, Chaired by Bishop

Elio Sgreccia, Secretary of the Pontifical Academy for Life, was on GMOs and the Ethical Perspective. The two key speakers were priests presenting opposing ethical views. Professor P. Gonzalo Miranda, Chairman of the Department of Bioethics, Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum spoke in favor of GMOs. He began by pointing out that some people believe genetic manipulation is, per se, an unethical act; that nature should not be changed in any way. This attitude assumes that nature is good, per se, and that all forms of manipulation are evil.

¶12. However, Sgreccia continued, this religious view of nature is not the "anthropomorphic vision" of man and nature of the Catholic Church. By returning to scripture we can see that man is the apex of the continuum of creation; that God created man and made him the custodian of creation, to use it for his own good and the glory of God. "The victories of humanity are a glory to God." Therefore, the works of man are not necessarily bad, or evil. We are "expected" by God to use our abilities to manipulate creation for our own ends and the glory of God. The Second Vatican Council, he cited, said, "Man is right to feel superior to other living beings". Quoting Pope John Paul II, "Science and technology are wonderful products of human creativity, which is a gift from God." Therefore, there is nothing intrinsically wrong about biotechnology. One must take a case-by-case view of the technology's use, weighing the circumstances, intentions and consequences of each event, in the light of its impact on humanity. It is incumbent upon scientists to work for the good of humanity and their work should enhance the "solidarity of man."

¶13. Father Miranda went on to provide recommendations. First, risk assessment and management are necessary, but every human activity entails risk. We need to be alert to the benefits, he said. We cannot forecast all contingencies so we must be careful and prudent. Benefits and risks have to be calculated on a case-by-case basis. Second, justice and equality have to be considered. The Church recognizes the function of profit -- it is not the work of the devil, but is necessary for progress. Vatican II recognized this. However, the fundamental objective of development is not just profit but the service it can offer mankind. Therefore, the needs and rights of farmers and others affected need to be considered. Monopolies, for example, need to be avoided, and all citizens need to be aware and have knowledge. Thus labeling can be useful. Finally, Miranda cautioned participants not to fall into the trap of believing that GMOs can solve all problems. Other measures are needed to solve the problems of poor countries and people. We cannot block the diffusion of technology because this would exhibit a lack of human solidarity.

¶14. The anti-GMO case within the Church was made by Father Roland Lesseps, Senior Scientist, Kasisi Agricultural Training Centre, Lusaka, Zambia. (Lessups and Father Peter Henriot were the American Jesuits who contributed to creating an anti-biotech climate in Zambia that resulted in the government's rejection of U.S. food aid last fall. End Comment.) Lesseps' presentation began with a very different anthropological vision of man and nature: one in which all God's creatures have intrinsic value, in and of themselves, and that nature is not just useful to us humans but valued and loved in itself, for itself, by God. Making reference to numerous religious sources, Lesseps built his case for the "sacredness of nature" and the need to "respect nature." The most salient quotation was from Pope John Paul II's World Peace Day message in 1990, which states, in part: "We can only look with deep concern at the enormous possibilities of biological research. We are not yet in a position to assess the biological disturbance that could result from indiscriminate genetic manipulation and from the unscrupulous development of new forms of plant and animal life,." From this ethical underpinning, Lesseps proceeded to construct an argument against GMOs that mirrored exactly the standard positions of the secular community similarly opposed.

¶15. At the end of these presentations there was not much time remaining for an exchange of opinions. The only exchange between the two priest presenters was initiated by Father Miranda who pointed out the crucial adjectives "indiscriminate" and "unscrupulous" in the Pope's statement as important qualifiers that all parties would agree with and that supported the need to look at events on a case-by-case basis.

¶16. The study seminar was closed by Cardinal Renato Martino, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. He said that the Church had been in the unfamiliar role as student for the last two days listening carefully to

the information provided. However, it cannot be expected that she will remain in this role for long, but rather, will in the near future issue a more detailed position on GMOs. The Church will not teach biology to biologists, but will instruct from its anthropological perspective as to whether actions are correct or otherwise.

Comment

¶17. Although no time frame was indicated, Cardinal Martino left the clear impression that the Holy See intended to issue a formal position on GMOs --sooner rather than later. From the tenor of the discussion, the final presentations, and comments made during the proceedings, FODAG and Embassy Vatican believe the church will likely stake out a generally positive position towards biotechnology that will emphasize the great potential benefits for mankind. Given the Holy See's desire to issue an ethical assessment, we expect the position could be an elaboration of the paper presented by Father Miranda that will stress the view that man is expected to manipulate creation for the benefit of mankind.

¶18. Media coverage of the Vatican event has been generally positive, highlighting the potential benefits of biotech foods to developing countries and quoting Vatican officials as cautioning against demonizing biotechnology and its applications. Although some biotech opponents have publicly criticized what they claimed was a stacking of the deck with biotech proponents, given the preponderance of favorable biotech views in the scientific community, the Vatican certainly went out of its way to maintain openness and balance to opponents. This effort to maintain balance strengthened the credibility of the study session, and now paves the way for a more forward-leaning Vatican statement. The Vatican's willingness to wade into this controversial subject in the face of considerable opposition within the Church, reflects the success of Embassy Vatican's efforts to frame this issue from a moral and ethical perspective over the past year and a half.

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